

U.S. military and Afghan military, police, and civilian officials attend flag-raising ceremony at Marjah, February 25, 2010

U.S. Marine Corps (Mary E. Carlin)

# U.S. Strategy in Afghanistan

## Flawed Assumptions Will Lead to Ultimate Failure

By MARK SCHRECKER

**O**n March 25, 2010, hundreds of residents of Marjah looked on as the red and green national flag of Afghanistan was raised by the governor of Helmand Province in a small ceremony in the center of town. Despite pockets of continued resistance, the Taliban had largely been evicted from Marjah, where, until recently, the group was considered to be too strong for the underresourced International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) to defeat. This military victory was the result of events set in motion nearly 3 months earlier by President Barack Obama. On December 1, 2009, the President addressed the Nation

regarding efforts in Afghanistan. He outlined the administration's strategy in a concise manner, clearly identifying national interests and the ends, ways, and means of a strategy that would send an additional 30,000 troops to Afghanistan by the end of 2010.

This article examines the strategic environment both generically and as a backdrop against which the administration's Afghanistan strategy was developed. It leverages both domestic and international contexts in evaluating the flawed assumptions conceived by the administration that ultimately resulted in a strategy poorly suited to support the national interest it is purported to serve. Finally, this

article suggests a template for refining the objectives of the strategy in order to reconnect them to national interests and increase the likelihood of a successful outcome.

### The Essential Elements of Strategy

Before assessing the Obama administration's strategy, it is useful both to define *strategy* and to agree upon its purpose.

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Lieutenant Colonel Mark Schrecker, USMC, wrote this essay while a student at the National War College. It won the Strategic Research Paper category of the 2010 Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Strategic Essay Competition.

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National War College Professor Terry Deibel defines *foreign affairs strategy* as a “plan for the coordinated use of all the instruments of state power to pursue objectives that protect and promote the national interest.”<sup>1</sup> The objectives, or output, of a successful foreign policy strategy must be crafted such that their achievement creates a strategic effect that supports a designated national interest. A strategy that achieves its given objectives but fails to support the associated national interest is at best a waste of resources and national power and at worst a threat to the national security of the country.

Formulation of effective foreign policy strategy is a complex undertaking. As Deibel points out, “The heart of the strategist’s work is to see clearly the extraordinarily complex interrelationships among the elements of strategy.”<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, before strategists can begin to contemplate the ends, ways, means, and national interests described above, they must first assess their assumptions regarding the strategic environment, for it is these assumptions that identify the threats, opportunities, and values that define interests, and also the extent and availability of resources (power) needed to achieve objectives. Put another way, strategy built on flawed assumptions is doomed to failure.

### The West Point Speech

On December 1, 2009, President Obama delivered a speech at West Point that articulated the new U.S. strategy in Afghanistan. This speech identified national interests and the ends, ways, and means of a counter-insurgency (COIN) strategy, making special mention of his specific goals regarding al Qaeda. During the laborious deliberations and planning that went into the development of this strategy, it is likely that the administration made several erroneous assumptions that will negatively affect success. Before examining these assumptions, however, we must first review the core elements of the strategy.

The President clearly articulated the national interest that would be supported by this strategy: “The security and safety of the American people [are] at stake in Afghanistan.”<sup>3</sup> He then detailed several al Qaeda attacks in support of his reiteration of the same overarching goal described in March: “to disrupt, dismantle and defeat Al Qaeda in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and prevent its capacity to threaten America and its Allies in



President Obama prepares to deliver his strategy for Afghanistan at West Point

the future.”<sup>4</sup> With the national interest identified and a regional goal specified, President Obama presented four specific objectives, or ends, for the administration’s strategy: deny al Qaeda a safe haven, reverse the Taliban’s momentum, deny it the ability to overthrow the government, and strengthen the capacity of Afghanistan’s security forces and government so they can take responsibility for the country’s future.<sup>5</sup>

To achieve these objectives, President Obama identified three core elements the strategy would employ: the military, a

### Assumptions

Having reviewed the administration’s strategy, we must return to the critical assumptions that underpin this strategy. Deibel tells us that assumptions are “of primary importance to the outcomes of strategic analysis” and that the “importance of such assumptions means that the battle for sound strategy can often be lost right there, at the very beginning.”<sup>6</sup> The current strategy is based on at least four critical assumptions regarding both domestic and international context. The first is that al Qaeda is still a

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“civilian surge,” and an effective partnership with Pakistan.<sup>6</sup> Although not specified as the “way” of the strategy, the method for applying the instruments can best be summarized as *counterinsurgency*. The tasks specified by the President—defeat of the Taliban, training Afghan security forces, improving governance, and growing the Afghan economy—are critical elements of a COIN operation.<sup>7</sup> Additionally, the identification of Pakistan as a safe haven and source of external support for the Taliban suggests the need for a strengthened U.S. alliance with Pakistan bolstered by security and economic assistance, as well as a promise of increased cooperation in matters above and beyond the Taliban insurgency.

threat to the United States and its citizens. The second, and perhaps most important, is that Afghanistan is of vital importance to al Qaeda. (Given the disproportionate amount of capital being expended, it must also be assumed that Afghanistan is of far greater value to al Qaeda than any other geographic location.) The third significant assumption is that a favorable outcome requires a COIN strategy. Finally, acceptance of the third assumption leads to the final assumption, that the United States has sufficient popular support and resources (and a willingness to commit them) to conduct a counterinsurgency and that it can be brought to a successful conclusion before the required support and resources are exhausted.

In many ways, the current administration “inherited” these assumptions from the previous administration. But whether the assumptions were inherited or formed independently as part of the strategic review, history suggests that “foreign affairs strategy that does not start out with realistic assumptions or that fails to alter them as reality changes has little hope of success.”<sup>9</sup> To evaluate the administration’s Afghanistan strategy, it is important to explore each of these assumptions and examine their relationship with, and impact on, the key elements of strategy.

### Understanding the Threat

Understanding the threat is critical to the strategist because it is this understanding that determines the seriousness of the threat and its relationship to national interests (if any). Only then can an informed prioritization of interests and determination of the appropriate resources (and methods of employing them) be performed. While there are many ways that a threat can be evaluated, any assessment should address seriousness, likelihood, and imminence.<sup>10</sup> Since the primary purpose of terrorism is to inspire fear in order to achieve a political goal, it follows that a serious strategic attack would be one that “results in a significant geopolitical policy shift by the target. An attack that destroys a strategic-level target such as the U.S. Capitol or that causes mass casualties—kills 1,000 people or more—would certainly rise to this level.”<sup>11</sup> We must consider then that al Qaeda has the intention and has, on one occasion, demonstrated the capability to carry out a serious attack.

Likelihood and imminence are difficult to measure but must be considered nonetheless. A comprehensive survey of terrorism in the West conducted by forensic psychiatrist Marc Sageman shows that “there were 60 plots over the past 20 years perpetrated by over 46 different networks. Of these only 14 successfully inflicted any casualty, and only 2 were perpetrated by Al Qaeda proper in the last 20 years.”<sup>12</sup> Sageman also points out that there has not been a single terrorist casualty in the West in the last 4 years and none in the United States in the last 8 years.<sup>13</sup>

A terrorist threat requires *both* intention to do harm *and* the capability to inflict harm. While the rhetoric from al Qaeda confirms the intent to inflict harm on the United States and other Western countries, careful analysis reveals a fractured extremist group whose core

leadership has been significantly attrited and whose capabilities have been vastly degraded.<sup>14</sup> John Brennan, President Obama’s most senior counterterrorism expert, suggests that “[al Qaeda] has been consumed with trying to ensure its security and stay out of the way in northern Pakistan . . . which has thankfully helped distract it from terrorist activities.”<sup>15</sup> Overestimation of a threat can lead strategists to grossly misjudge a capability. John Mueller suggests that extreme events such as 9/11 are often seen as harbingers of events to come but that these events rarely materialize.<sup>16</sup> In a strategic environment that holds significantly reduced domestic means, it is critical that we apply resources in a quantity and scope commensurate with the threat that is actually present rather than the one we infer.

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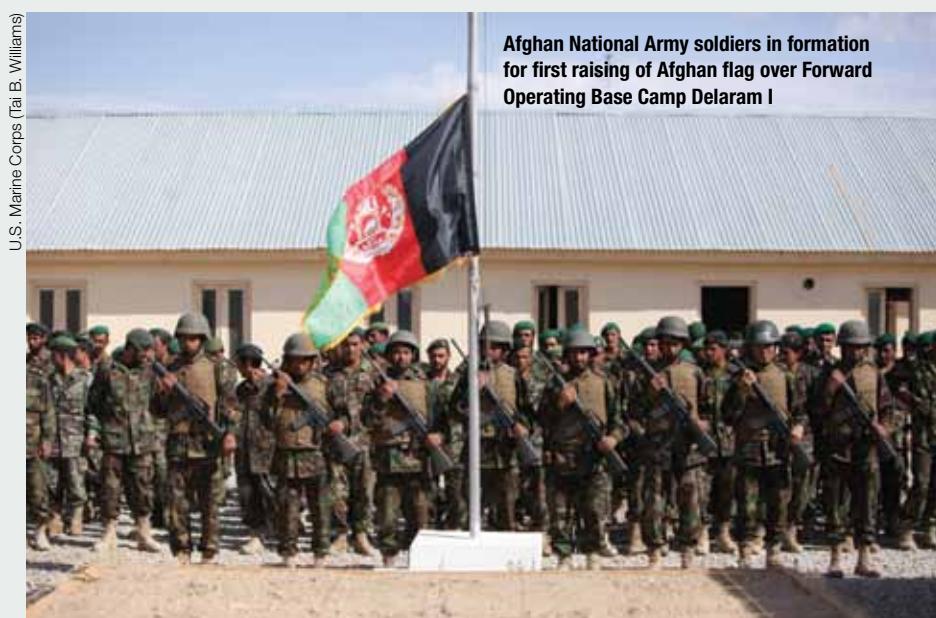
### Linking Objectives to National Interest

When President Obama stated, “If I did not think that the security of the United States and the safety of the American people were at stake in Afghanistan, I would gladly order every single one of our troops home,” he was clearly defining the national interest supported by the Afghanistan strategy as *physical security* of the United States and its citizens.<sup>17</sup> The President translates that national interest into an actionable goal: “to disrupt, dismantle

and defeat Al Qaeda in Afghanistan and Pakistan and to prevent its capacity to threaten America and our allies in the future.”<sup>18</sup> Yet just moments after stating the overarching goal, the President presented the four actual objectives of the Afghanistan strategy, only one of which directly addressed al Qaeda (the other three address the Taliban, specifically the Taliban in Afghanistan). While this is not necessarily counterintuitive, it does rely on a significant assumption (or more specifically, several significant assumptions) that must somehow link al Qaeda, the Taliban, and the country of Afghanistan.

In an article in *Joint Force Quarterly*, Ralph Peters refers to Afghanistan as both “a worthless piece of dirt” and “a strategic booby prize.”<sup>19</sup> While these brash statements

are likely overly dismissive of the role Afghanistan should play in a U.S. strategy regarding al Qaeda, the fact remains that the current strategy suggests an inextricable relationship among Afghanistan, the Taliban, and al Qaeda that simply has not been substantiated. The overarching assumption is that “the return to power by the Taliban will automatically allow Al Qaeda to reconstitute in Afghanistan, complete with training camps and resurgence of Al Qaeda’s ability to project



to the West and threaten the homeland.”<sup>20</sup> To address this assumption regarding the return to power by the Taliban, we must examine three subassumptions that break the problem down for deeper analysis.<sup>21</sup>

The first subassumption regarding Afghanistan is that a withdrawal of ISAF forces will result in Taliban control of Afghanistan. While General Stanley McChrystal’s grim prognosis for the future of Afghanistan was likely warranted, it must also be noted that the Taliban of today is quite different from the Taliban that took over Kabul in 1996. Rather than a monolithic entity able to generate a unity of effort, the current Taliban might be better characterized as a loose group of local insurgencies. While the Taliban has demonstrated the ability to assert some semblance of regional control, it would be a significant stretch to assert that it could “coalesce in the near future into an offensive force capable of marching on Kabul.”<sup>22</sup>

The second subassumption is that al Qaeda’s relocation to Afghanistan would automatically follow a Taliban return to power. This assumption overlooks two important facts: there is no real reason for al Qaeda to return, and there is no guarantee that it would be welcomed by the Taliban. Until the recent crackdown in Pakistan, al Qaeda enjoyed a viable sanctuary in this country. It should be noted that although the Taliban regained significant portions of Afghanistan after its ouster by coalition forces in 2001, there is little evidence that al Qaeda actually moved back into these Taliban-controlled areas.<sup>23</sup> Al Qaeda is an extremist organization that will seek sanctuary in any location that suits its needs.<sup>24</sup> There is certainly no shortage of potential sanctuaries for core al Qaeda in areas inhabited by al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula and al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb. Certainly these areas would seem preferable to anywhere in Afghanistan and Pakistan, which are likely the most scrutinized areas on the face of the Earth when it comes to Western pursuit of terrorism and terrorist havens.

The final subassumption regarding Afghanistan is that if al Qaeda does return, Afghanistan would rapidly devolve into the “pre-9/11” repository for terrorist planning and training camps. As with the previous two assumptions regarding Afghanistan, this one simply does not stand up to scrutiny. As Sageman points out, the “presence of large sanctuaries in Afghanistan was predicated

on Western not so benign neglect of Al Qaeda funded camps there.”<sup>25</sup> The assumption that these camps will return under any circumstance misreads both past and present actions. Sageman continues, “Vigilance through electronic monitoring, spatial surveillance, networks of informants in contested territory, exploitation of Afghan rivalries, combined with the nearby stationing of a small force dedicated to physically eradicate any visible presence of Al Qaeda in Afghanistan, will prevent the return of Al Qaeda to Afghanistan.”<sup>26</sup>

Given the fallacies in these subassumptions, it follows that the overarching assumption—that Afghanistan is of vital importance to al Qaeda—is not valid. This, in turn, has huge implications for the Obama administration’s strategy. The singular purpose

## Why Counterinsurgency?

The objectives of the administration’s strategy have, at best, a dubious link to the President’s overarching goal. Despite questions regarding both the source and the

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scope of the primary threat from al Qaeda, the group’s inflammatory and threatening rhetoric suggests that the disruption, dismantling, and ultimate defeat of the network are still a viable goal. So the question remains: how is it possible that the

**Afghan National Police recruits wait to receive graduation certificates at Camp Shorabak**



U.S. Marine Corps (Paige J. Bray)

of this strategy must be to ensure that the overarching goal of disrupting, dismantling, and defeating al Qaeda is met. It is conceivable, however, that the United States and its coalition partners could reverse the Taliban’s momentum, deny it the ability to overthrow the government, and strengthen the capacity of Afghanistan’s security forces such that al Qaeda is denied sanctuary in Afghanistan, yet also *fail to meet any of the overarching goals simply because al Qaeda did not need Afghanistan*.

administration could develop a strategy that is so disconnected from the goals and interests it was designed to support? The answer likely lies in the third flawed assumption: that *success requires a counterinsurgency*. It appears that the administration selected counterinsurgency as the “ways” portion of the strategy first and then worked backward to determine what “ends” (objectives) this “way” could produce and what “means” (resources) would be required to achieve these ends.

The process of developing foreign policy strategy is complex and comprises a vast number of interrelated elements; it should not be viewed as a process with a singular start point that walks through a set of rigid, linear steps to reach an endstate. Despite this fact, selecting the ways to apply resources without at least considering necessary objectives and available resources is akin to deciding to buy a Mercedes-Benz without considering transportation needs or budget. Similarly, for U.S. policymakers and strategists, the allure of COIN, despite its limitations and insatiable resource requirements, appears to have been too hard to resist.<sup>27</sup> Opting for a counterinsurgency strategy may prove to be particularly troublesome not only because a successful outcome would only affect the Taliban (not al Qaeda), but also, and perhaps even more importantly,

for ISAF is that the Afghan security forces are likely years from achieving both the capability and capacity to provide security to their own people. In the interim, the security provided by ISAF is accepted only grudgingly by the insular Afghan population, which has historically despised the intervention of outsiders for any reason. Until Afghan security forces are able to provide security autonomously to the citizens, it is unlikely the Hamid Karzai government will achieve the legitimacy required to sustain effective governance.

Although security is of the utmost importance to ISAF and the Karzai government, it is just one of many obstacles that stand in the way of attaining legitimacy in the eyes of the people and establishing effective governance.<sup>28</sup> The tribal nature and diverse mix of ethnic groups create a unique challenge

factored in, the barriers that impede effective governance seem insurmountable.

Unfortunately, a COIN strategy in Afghanistan is at best “irrelevant to the goal of disrupting, dismantling and defeating al Qaeda, which is located in Pakistan.”<sup>29</sup> Even if the Taliban is defeated, will America be any safer? Given the demonstrated reluctance of al Qaeda to return to Afghanistan since 9/11, defeating the Taliban amounts to nothing more than defeating the Afghans, whose goals are parochial and local.<sup>30</sup> As it turns out, it is terrorism in America that proved a threat to Americans, not insurgency in Afghanistan.

### High Cost of Achieving Objectives

Given the complex nature of COIN, and the vast resources it requires, it seems only logical that the administration’s Afghanistan

**Ghazni Province community development representative discusses irrigation project with Chardewal village elders**



U.S. Air Force (Sarah R. Webb)

because conducting successful COIN operations usually requires the commitment of vast resources and generally takes years.<sup>28</sup>

While myriad factors make COIN operations difficult, the cornerstones of COIN, security and governance, will likely prove most problematic in Afghanistan. The COIN manual of the Army and Marine Corps offers that the “cornerstone of any COIN effort is establishing security for the civilian populace” but also warns that it is better for the host nation to provide this security.<sup>29</sup> The problem

for anyone attempting to unite the people under a strong central government.<sup>30</sup> Compounding the complex demographic issues is the problem of corruption. As recently as 2009, Afghanistan was ranked as the second most corrupt nation on the planet.<sup>31</sup> President Karzai has been linked with nearly every type of corruption imaginable from election fraud, to bribery and extortion, to drug trafficking (along with his brother Ahmed Wali Karzai). When the abysmal literacy rate, harsh geography, and antiquated infrastructure are

strategy should have been evaluated before being finalized and put into execution. There are myriad ways to evaluate a strategy; however, at a minimum the strategist must determine whether the instruments as applied will have an impact that leads to the successful accomplishment of the stated goals at an acceptable cost (desirability). Additionally, the strategist must determine if the required level of resources and support can be maintained over the time required to accomplish the goals (sustainability).<sup>32</sup> Sustainability is difficult

to gauge but is of particular importance in assessing the decision to use counterinsurgency, since it normally requires vast resources and long-term commitment.

Sustainment of COIN operations in Afghanistan will likely face at least three significant challenges: maintaining the support of the American people, maintaining funding from Congress in the face of the ongoing budget crisis, and maintaining the support of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and other coalition partners. Shortly after the President's West Point speech, 51 percent of Americans supported his plan. However, in that same survey, an overwhelming majority (73 percent) worried that the costs of the war will make it more difficult to deal with problems close to home.<sup>36</sup> Unless the U.S. economy begins a dramatic recovery, support for counterinsurgency will be hard to sustain, especially when little tangible progress is made. The apparent (and widely reported) success of the drone strikes against members of al Qaeda may begin to persuade the American people (and, by extension, Congress) that a new strategy may be required.

Although somewhat tenuous, support within the United States appears to be far less problematic than sustained support from NATO Allies and other coalition partners. NATO commitment in Afghanistan continues to wane as evidenced by the recent collapse

of the Dutch government over a proposal to extend the use of its nation's forces beyond August 2010. The Alliance's failure to provide requested troop levels and the significant caveats that accompany committed troops have proven frustrating to senior U.S. military officials. In a recent speech to the NATO Strategic Concept Seminar, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates suggested that a large portion of the European public and political class have grown so averse to "the use of military

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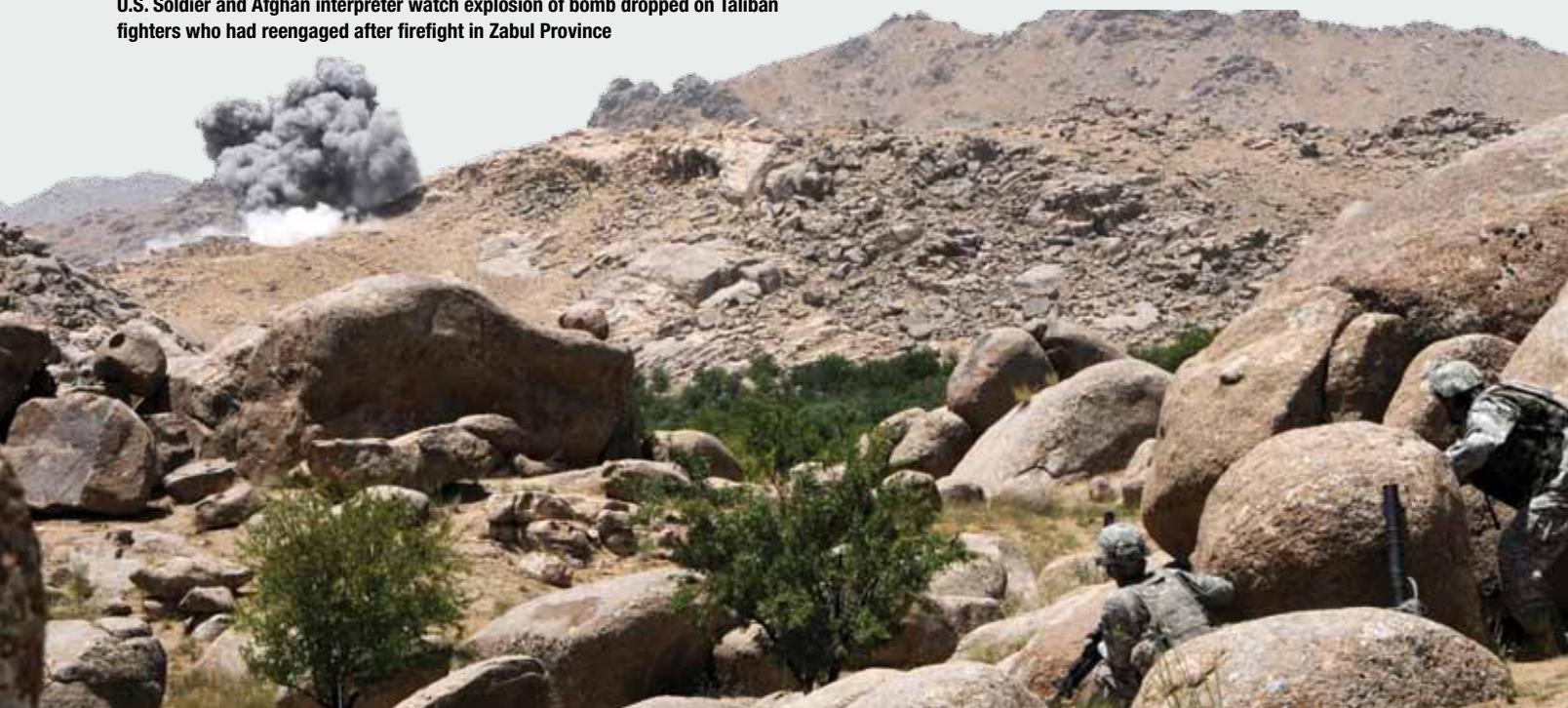
force and the risks that go with it" that "it has become a real impediment to achieving security and lasting peace in the 21<sup>st</sup> century."<sup>37</sup>

President Karzai has stated that "it will be at least five years before Afghan forces can take the lead in the fight against Taliban insurgents," and he further predicted that "it would be at least 15 years before his government could pay for its own forces."<sup>38</sup> These predictions seem consistent with noted experts who generally agree that it will take no less than 5 years for Afghan forces to have sufficient capability and capacity to operate autonomously and that defeat of the Taliban

will likely take 10 to 15 years even with U.S. assistance.<sup>39</sup> There seems, however, a significant disconnect between current U.S. strategy and the common timeframes espoused by U.S. COIN doctrine, noted experts, and Afghan leaders. President Obama suggests that "additional American and international troops will allow us to accelerate handing over responsibility to Afghan forces and allow us to begin the transfer of our forces out of Afghanistan in July 2011."<sup>40</sup> The effect of a timetable on the Afghan people will likely be disastrous, however, since it is a basic tenet of COIN that the "populace must have confidence in the staying power of both the counterinsurgents and the Host Nation government."<sup>41</sup>

Even if counterinsurgency operations defeat the Taliban, will the cost of this campaign be worth the prevention of a *fractured and weakened* al Qaeda potentially returning to Afghanistan? The monetary costs alone are staggering. To date, the Congressional Budget Office estimates that \$345 billion has been spent on Afghanistan since September 11, 2001.<sup>42</sup> Despite the cost, the continued willingness of the United States and its allies to bear these burdens suggests that the current strategy is feasible.<sup>43</sup> Whether or not it is sustainable depends largely on how much longer it will take to achieve success. Feasibility and sustainability are not the only tests because they only measure whether the

**U.S. Soldier and Afghan interpreter watch explosion of bomb dropped on Taliban fighters who had reengaged after firefight in Zabul Province**



U.S. Army (William Tremblay)

objectives *can* be accomplished. Perhaps the more important question is *should* accomplishment be attempted (that is, are the objectives *desirable*?). Even if strategists agree that a goal is attainable and in accord with the national interest, they must also determine if it is worth the resources it consumes. To accurately assess this strategy, it is necessary to add up not only hundreds of billions of dollars and thousands of American lives, but also the social disruption at home, damage to the Nation's financial stability, injury to the Nation's prestige abroad, and opportunity costs of other foreign and domestic policy goals that were not achieved because of the ongoing struggles in Afghanistan.<sup>44</sup> Successful national strategy demands that these costs be weighed against the threat of al Qaeda returning to Afghanistan.

### Can We Fix the Problem?

President Obama has promised to review the current strategy in December of this year, his third review in 22 months. The administration must adjust flawed assumptions to facilitate a refinement of the current strategy. This review should begin with an honest assessment of the current threat posed

to assess. "Defeat" is a worthy goal but is not required to ensure security, nor is it feasible given the networked nature of al Qaeda and the vast resources and time that this task requires. A better goal might be to continue efforts to disrupt al Qaeda to degrade its capability to attack the United States and its allies from anywhere in the world.

While the overarching goal requires only minor adjustment, the objectives of the strategy must be completely revised to reestablish a linkage with the goal. Defeating the Taliban does not affect al Qaeda, and it does not make America safer. Our objective should be to strengthen the capacity of the security forces and governments of Afghanistan and Pakistan so they can ensure stability and safety in their countries and deny al Qaeda safe havens within their borders. The means to achieve these objectives are essentially the same as those used in the current strategy: the military, a civilian surge, and an effective partnership with Pakistan. The major difference would be in the scope and role of the military instrument. A revised strategy would rapidly draw down the number of troops required and refocus the remaining troops solely on training Afghan security forces.

### *the administration must adjust flawed assumptions to facilitate a refinement of the current strategy*

by al Qaeda. Simply deciding that al Qaeda is still dangerous is not enough. Rigorous analysis would likely reveal the "growing consensus among analysts that al Qaeda is increasingly isolated and starved of funds."<sup>45</sup> It should recognize that al Qaeda remains a threat but one that has been degraded and dispersed, with perhaps the most serious threat now coming from al Qaeda offshoots in Yemen or Somalia.<sup>46</sup> Finally, and perhaps most importantly, this evaluation should recognize al Qaeda as a fungible network that is not beholden to any geographic ties, noting especially that "the resurgence of the Taliban in Afghanistan does not seem to have bolstered al Qaeda's fortunes."<sup>47</sup>

A better understanding of the nature of the threat will allow for minor adjustments to the President's goals regarding al Qaeda and a major adjustment to the objectives of this strategy. "Disrupt" is a good task and arguably one we are already accomplishing. "Dismantle" should be discarded if for no other reason than it is ambiguous and nearly impossible

This change in methodology regarding the employment of the military immediately suggests a return to the question: Should we do counterinsurgency or counterterrorism (CT)? Yet this represents a false dichotomy. The real question to ask is, should we do COIN *in addition* to CT? In other words, what is the added value of counterinsurgency in Afghanistan to a necessary and continuing CT strategy worldwide?<sup>48</sup> To date, the administration has failed to adequately answer this all-important question.

Rather than juxtaposing COIN and CT, perhaps a better way to evaluate the policy choices available to the administration would be to decide on whether to use a direct or an indirect approach. The use of a *direct approach* means "achieves security objectives through the U.S.-led application of military power."<sup>49</sup> This is the approach currently in use in Afghanistan. ISAF has had some limited successes such as the recent operations in Marjah; however, these successes have been few in number, have questionable long-term

impact, and have resulted only in the defeat of Taliban forces, not al Qaeda. In contrast, an *indirect approach* meets "security objectives by working with and through foreign partners."<sup>50</sup> This approach is typified by current efforts in Pakistan and Yemen. These operations have been highly successful in targeting al Qaeda and disrupting its operations.<sup>51</sup> The indirect approach yields some degree of control over operations, but its recent successes are undeniable and have the added advantages of being cost effective and of keeping a relatively low profile of American involvement in a region that widely opposes Western intervention.

*Washington Post* columnist David Ignatius points out that the Pentagon "has adopted this proxy strategy of training 'friendly' countries (meaning ones that share with us the enemy of Islamic extremism) from North Africa to the Philippines."<sup>52</sup> It is time for the Obama administration to adopt this strategy in both its global and regional policies on combating the terrorist threats posed by al Qaeda and other Islamic extremist groups. Even countries such as Pakistan, which historically have been skeptical of partnering with the United States, have recently proven to be significant success stories in the indirect approach to disrupting terrorist threats.<sup>53</sup> Any future review of strategy must acknowledge the immense progress that has been made employing host nation forces in a leading role.

For a strategy to be desirable, its objectives must be both necessary and worth the cost required to achieve them. If the Obama administration would eliminate unnecessary objectives and refocus solely on goals that impact al Qaeda, it would be possible to develop a strategy that not only uses fewer resources, but also is more effective at achieving the President's goals.

With each passing day, the United States and its allies maintain a massive force in Afghanistan. As the image of Western occupation of a Muslim country takes root, it fuels a radical Islamic backlash against the United States. After 10 years of fruitless fighting and an immeasurable squandering of U.S. treasure and blood, it is not al Qaeda that will remain in Afghanistan. What will remain are generations of frustrated Afghan citizens who will harbor a hatred of the West, and specifically the United States, for generations to come. **JFQ**

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Terry L. Deibel, *Foreign Affairs Strategy: Logic for American Statecraft* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 10.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>3</sup> The White House, “Remarks by the President in Address to the Nation on the Way Forward in Afghanistan and Pakistan,” United States Military Academy at West Point, December 1, 2009, available at <[www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-address-nation-way-forward-afghanistan-and-pakistan](http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-address-nation-way-forward-afghanistan-and-pakistan)>.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* See also Deibel, 206–210.

<sup>7</sup> See Field Manual (FM) 3–24, *Counterinsurgency* (Washington, DC: Headquarters Department of the Army, December 15, 2006) for more information on COIN doctrine.

<sup>8</sup> Deibel, 36.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 144–145.

<sup>11</sup> Fred Burton and Scott Stewart, “Al Qaeda and the Strategic Threat to the U.S. Homeland,” July 25, 2007, available at <[www.stratfor.com/memberships/23715/al\\_qaeda\\_and\\_strategic\\_threat\\_u\\_s\\_homeland](http://www.stratfor.com/memberships/23715/al_qaeda_and_strategic_threat_u_s_homeland)>.

<sup>12</sup> Marc Sageman, “Confronting Al Qaeda: Understanding the Threat in Afghanistan,” *Perspectives on Terrorism* 3, no. 4 (December 2009), 4. Emphasis added.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>14</sup> Many experts suggest that al Qaeda has fragmented considerably since 9/11 into a number of regional organizations that vary in intention, capability, and even ideology. For more information on the evolving nature of al Qaeda, see James Blitz, “Al Qaeda: A Threat Transformed,” January 18, 2010, available at <[www.ft.com/cms/s/0/173635a6-046f-11df-8603-00144feabdc0.html?catid=176&SID=google](http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/173635a6-046f-11df-8603-00144feabdc0.html?catid=176&SID=google)>; and Scott Stewart, “Jihadism in 2010: The Threat Continues,” January 6, 2010, available at <[www.stratfor.com/weekly/20100106\\_jihadism\\_2010\\_threat\\_continues](http://www.stratfor.com/weekly/20100106_jihadism_2010_threat_continues)>.

<sup>15</sup> Blitz.

<sup>16</sup> John Mueller, “Simplicity and Spook: Terrorism and the Dynamics of Threat Exaggeration,” *International Studies Perspectives* 6 (May 2005), 220–221.

<sup>17</sup> The White House.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> Ralph Peters, “Trapping Ourselves in Afghanistan and Losing Focus on the Essential Mission,” *Joint Force Quarterly* 54 (3<sup>d</sup> Quarter, 2009), 63.

<sup>20</sup> Sageman, 21.

<sup>21</sup> Unless otherwise specified, the discussion of the following three subassumptions draws on Sageman, 21–22.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>24</sup> Sageman also points out that “while the focus has long been on Afghanistan and Pakistan, we must remember that Al Qaeda was deeply entrenched in the Sudan from 1992–1996,” and it was during this time that “Al Qaeda developed its strategy to target the West, and especially the United States and trained potential terrorists there.” He goes on to suggest that had al Qaeda not been ousted from Sudan, we would likely be discussing strategy options for Sudan instead of Afghanistan.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> Steven Simon, “Can the Right War be Won? Defining American Interests in Afghanistan,” *Foreign Affairs* (July–August 2009).

<sup>28</sup> FM 3–24, chapter 1. See especially page 1–24: “COIN operations always demand considerable expenditure of time and resources.”

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 1–23. See also pages 1–27 and 1–28 for a discussion on the importance of the host nation taking over responsibility for security as soon as possible.

<sup>30</sup> The challenges facing rebuilding and reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan are staggering. The Government Accountability Office (GAO), *Securing, Stabilizing, and Reconstructing Afghanistan: Key Issues for Congressional Oversight* (Washington, DC: GAO, May 2007), provides an excellent overview of these challenges.

<sup>31</sup> For a particularly personal look at the tribal nature of Afghanistan, see Jim Gant, *One Tribe at a Time* (Los Angeles: Nine Sisters Imports, Inc., 2009).

<sup>32</sup> Corruption data provided by Transparency.org and available at <[www.transparency.org/policy\\_research/surveys\\_indices/cpi/2009/cpi\\_2009\\_table](http://www.transparency.org/policy_research/surveys_indices/cpi/2009/cpi_2009_table)>.

<sup>33</sup> Sageman, 20. Emphasis added.

<sup>34</sup> See “Najibullah Zazi Reveals Chilling Details on Al Qaeda Training and Terrorist Plot to Blow Up Subways,” *New York Daily News*, February 23, 2010.

<sup>35</sup> For a discussion on the necessity of evaluating strategy and techniques for evaluation, see: Deibel, 322–323; Boone Bartholomees, “A Survey of the Theory of Strategy,” *U.S. Army War College Guide to National Security Policy and Strategy*, 2<sup>d</sup> ed. (Carlisle Barracks, PA: U.S. Army War College, June 2006), 82; Harry Yarger, *Strategic Theory for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: The Little Book on Big Strategy* (Carlisle Barracks, PA: U.S. Army War College, Strategic Studies Institute, February 2006), 63.

<sup>36</sup> *USA Today/Gallup Poll* conducted December 3, 2009, available at <[voices.washingtonpost.com/44/2009/12/usa-todaygallup-poll-majority.html](http://voices.washingtonpost.com/44/2009/12/usa-todaygallup-poll-majority.html)>.

<sup>37</sup> From Secretary Gates’s speech to the NATO Strategic Concept Seminar, National Defense University, February 23, 2010, available at <[www.defense.gov/speeches/speech.aspx?speechid=1423](http://www.defense.gov/speeches/speech.aspx?speechid=1423)>. It is especially noteworthy that only 5 of 28 NATO member nations (including the United States) meet the 2 percent of gross domestic product per year mark.

<sup>38</sup> Anne Gearan and Anne Flaherty, “McChrystal: No ‘Silver Bullets for Success’ in Afghanistan,”

*The Huffington Post*, December 8, 2009, available at <[www.huffingtonpost.com/2009/12/08/mccrystal-no-silver-bull\\_n\\_384022.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2009/12/08/mccrystal-no-silver-bull_n_384022.html)>.

<sup>39</sup> For further discussion on the time it will take for Afghan security forces to become self-sufficient, see, for example, Seth Jones, *Counterinsurgency in Afghanistan* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2008), 10. See also David Kilcullen’s testimony to U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearing on Afghanistan, February 5, 2009, available at <<http://smallwarsjournal.com/blog/2009/02/crunch-time-in-afghanistanpaki>>. Kilcullen suggests that a “Prevent, Protect, Build, Hand-Off” strategy similar to the one proposed by the Obama administration will take “ten to fifteen years.”

<sup>40</sup> The White House. See also Con Coughlin, “Has the West Got the Will to Carry on Shedding Blood for the Afghans?” *London Daily Telegraph*, January 29, 2010, for an even rosier projection by former British Prime Minister Tony Blair, who claimed that Afghans would be able to start taking charge of their own security by 2010.

<sup>41</sup> FM 3–24, 1–24.

<sup>42</sup> “Cost of Iraq, Afghanistan Tops \$1 Trillion,” Reuters, January 26, 2010, available at <[www.reuters.com/article/idUS2611591520100126](http://www.reuters.com/article/idUS2611591520100126)>.

<sup>43</sup> For a strategy to be feasible, the Nation must have sufficient resources on hand and be willing and able to commit them in the quantity required to achieve the stated objective. See Deibel, 297, for the importance of feasibility and desirability in setting objectives and also chapter eight, “Evaluating Courses of Action.”

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 299. These considerations are adapted from an example Deibel uses when discussing U.S. involvement in Vietnam.

<sup>45</sup> Christine Bartolf and Bernard I. Finel, *Are We Winning? Measuring Progress in the Struggle Against Al Qaeda and Associated Movements: 2009 Report* (Washington, DC: American Security Project, 2009), 3.

<sup>46</sup> These regional subsidiaries are dangerous not only as organized entities capable of projecting violence to the West, but also for their demonstrated desire to recruit and train Westerners to carry out terrorist acts in their home countries.

<sup>47</sup> Bartolf and Finel, 3.

<sup>48</sup> Sageman, 20.

<sup>49</sup> Department of Defense Directive 3000.07, “Irregular Warfare,” 11.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> For more information on recent U.S. operations with Yemen, see Dana Priest, “U.S. Military Teams, Intelligence Deeply Involved in Aiding Yemen on Strikes,” *The Washington Post*, January 27, 2010.

<sup>52</sup> David Ignatius, “Bringing Partners to the Fight,” *The Washington Post*, January 28, 2010.

<sup>53</sup> Joby Warrick and Peter Finn, “CIA Director Says Attacks Have Hobbled Al-Qaeda,” *The Washington Post*, March 18, 2010.